DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 055 CG 013 480

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TITLE Developments in Family Stress Theory: Implication for Family Impact Analysis.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 15p.; Best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adaptation Level Theory; Behavior Patterns; Family (Sociological Unit); *Family Relationship; *Family Structure; Financial Support; Group Unity; Models; *Reactive Behavior; *Social Environment; *Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

Family stress theory as a framework for family policy and family impact analysis is compatible with, and a logical development within, a broader ecological context of immediate and wider social environments. The central assumption of the family stress framework is that families have the capacity to organize a variety of supports--economic, social, and psychological--and are capable of responding to stress in creative and adaptive ways. This framework encourages an important shift in emphasis toward prevention rather than treatment and the development of support programs and related policies. (Author)

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DEVELOPMENTS IN FAMILY STRESS THEORY: IMPLICATION FOR FAMILY IMPACT ANALYSIS

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The family in America is under stress. It is changing, taking on varying forms, and is the focus of considerable social and psychological insults. Faced with social change at an accelerating tempo, the family has faced divorces at an increasing and alarming rate. It has reached a point in some part of the United States where the rate of survival for a period of ten years can be predicted with a toss of coin. There is an increasing number of single parent families, due in part to rising rates of adolescent pregnancies and mothers who choose willingly to keep their children. Social mobility has played a part in the separation of families from kin and supportive social networks which have always played an import role in supporting families. Even the more positive developments in society have created stress for the family. The rising number of women leaving the home for paid work and the gradual but predictable movement toward sexual equality appear to place some new strains upon family stability. Some social scientists have presented these indices of family strain as evidence for the demise of the family.

To draw such a conclusion would be premature. On the statistical side of the picture, Bane's (1967) thorough and insightful analysis of families in the twentieth century suggests a more hopeful, but not altogether glimmering picture of the family in modern society. While the number of children is proportionately fewer, the data suggest that the "parental watchfulness over children...over the span of three generations...has increased." Furthermore parent-child bonds appear to be relatively stable in the face of changes in patterns of marital discord and living arrangements after marital disruption. On the basis of the data presented, it reasonable for Bane (1976:19) to argue that the trend toward more mothers in the work role has not materially affected child-parent bonds. Divorce in the twentieth century continues to rise, particularly the ratio of vuluntary to involuntary disruption. However the evidence is not convincing that casual relationships have replaced permanent families. The majority of Americans do marry and, in general, the remarriage rates have kept pace with the divorce rates. In the management of live events , the family has remained relatively stable and has responded well to the demands of mobility, war and disquieting changes in the nation's economy. Basically, the family appears to have

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emerged triumphant in its long and arduous competition with social change. The balance in observations about the stability of the family does not negate however, the need to be cautious about family stress and the family's ability to adapt to stress. There remains some reason to be concerned about family organization and family stability. A decline in family stability and the rapid emergence of single parent families does present a potential threat to society's next generation. It is easy to understand and appreciate why society and government have taken this issue quite seriously and have encouraged and supported efforts toward the development of family policies and examine the impact of social policy upon the American family.

How families are able to manage stress brought about by social change and how it is able to adapt to change are important questions for the social scientist and policy analyst struggling to understand what might be reasonable goals for family policy and how we would assess the impact of policy on family life. These issues are being addressed at the State and Federal levels, as well as in select Universities involved in Family Impact Analysis. Moving from the value position that the family is the cornerstone of society and is the nation's most precious resource (Hill, 1949), this paper attempts to facilitate ongoing efforts in family impact analysis by calling attention to and discussing the role of family stress theory as a viable framework for family policy and family impact analysis.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON FAMILY POLICY AND ANALYSIS

Individual Values as a Framework for Family Policy

Present efforts to develop a framework for family policy and the methodology for family impact analysis must first be viewed in the historical and social context of social policy in America. The development of family policies which focus on strengthening the family unit and its adaptive capacities is at odds with the dominant trend of modern social policy. Like other aspects of Western industrialization, the United States emphasizes individual values, the preservation and enhancement of individual rights. Moynihan's (1965:71) analysis of national policy focuses on the central deterrent to family policy:

> "American social policy until now has been directed towards the individual. The individual - and the various circumstances relating to him - has been our primary unit of measurement; men women and children are all lumped together. ...examples are numerous; the point does not change. American arrangements pertain to to the individual and only in the rarest circumstances do they define the family as a relevant unit."

In contrast, the industrial democracies of Western Europe present a strong emphasis on families and family policy. Most of the industrial democracies of the world have adopted a wide range of social programs

designed specifically to support the stability and viability of the family unit. Family allowances, for example, is nearly a uniform practice in such societies and "except in the United States, family allowances are practically a hallmark of an advanced industrial society (Monihan: 1975:71).

This seemingly trite and often overstated comparison between the United States and other Western industrial societies on the issue of family policy and family impact analysis does not ignore the vast achievements in social policies as a result of this tradition of American individualism. Certainly the advances in viable tax structures, medical and mental health programs, and social welfare programs must be credited to this individualistic perspective. Individualism has served this nation well in guiding and developing policies to deal with social issues of uneven distribution of wealth, the development of health and economic support programs for the unemployed and the disabled. But it is equally true that developments and refinements in social programs in other Western societies have emerged not from an individualistic framework, but from an integrated view of health and human development with the family unit as the central social institution. Following conventional wisdom, efforts to significantly alter society's primary emphasis on individual values appears hopeless, at best. Equally questionable is the tendency to put forth the Western industrial model as the "ideal" of what American Family policy should be. To pursue the individual versus family dichotomy and to treat them as being mutually exclusive would present a barrier to meaningful discussion and would ultimately frustrate efforts to think rationally about American Family policy. This would also minimize efforts toward the much needed integration of individual and family policy. In laying the groundwork for linking family stress theory with family impact analysis, it is first important to underscore the value of both individual and family policy. Assuming that the family's ability to endure and survive to perform its numerous functions is dependent upon its members' "individual" resources as well as the family's "collective" resources. It seems reasonable to argue for policies which strengthen both and to begin to turn our attention to how we can best achieve a balance in policies.

Crisis as a Framework for Family Policy

Traditional approaches to policy has been based on the fundamental assumption that state or federal support to families should be based on extreme need, that is when families demonstrate their inability to meet the needs of its children and are no longer able to fulfill its responsibilities. Moroney (1978:2) captured the central issue in his question: "Should the State seek to prevent or minimize stressful situations both environmental or personal or should it react to problems and crises as they arise?" Policy makers and analysts have presented a strong and persuasive argument that scarce resources should be limited to those families and individuals with the greatest need. This is sound fiscal

planning. The AFDC program has amounted to for most of its history - a family allowance program for broken families. Each family is given a sum of money according to its needs, as measured by its size. But only after the family breaks up. The millions of dollars being allocated to the experimental Work Equity Programs to promote the movement of women on welfare into the work force, is attributable to the crisis of increasingly large welfare roles.

In contrast, arguments have also been presented which point out the hidden costs of such a piecemeal approach to meeting human and family needs. Generally speaking, policies which respond to crises or widely proclaimed hardships after they have occurred is short-sighted planning and have a high probability of producing side-effects which may ultimately call for additional policies and increased costs. The AFDC program followed by the Work Equity Program noted above is a case in point. Working within this crisis framework, policy makers have produced a series of meaningful policies and programs which appear to be contradictory, and in some cases counterproductive when assessed from the perspective of a family impact analyst. Commonly noted examples of policies which are valuable in their own right, but which appear to operate at cross purposes to family stability include (a) Welfare policies governing Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) which appear to subsidize family breakdown and desertion; and (b) Health policies which call for a shift in the care and treatment of emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded family members from residential or institution treatment to the family unit. Guided by the crisis of rising costs to operate large institutions and the emphasis on community or home treatment, policy makers embrace this Health policy on family care as the ultimate answer, but without careful consideration of what family resources would be needed to effect a successful outcome. Certainly, the continuous discussions and concerns about a fragmented health and social delivery system of services around the country reflect the tenuous nature of crises oriented policies and programs. The crisis framework has been helpful in guiding policies, setting priorities, and in the allocation of scarce resources, but does not appear sufficient to improve upon family policies, and is not complete in propositions to facilitate family impact analysis.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: THE ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR FAMILY IMPACT ANALYSIS

The Family Impact Seminar at George Washington University's Institute for Educational Leadership has advanced the Ecological perspective for family impact analysis. The core principle of this framework is that the family can best be understood in the context of its relationships in the immediate and wider social environment. The framework focuses upon the interdependency of the family and the social system. The major underlying proposition of this perspective is that a change in one dimension of the social environment will produce a chain of reactions in other elements of the social system. This interdependence of the family and the environment

is reflected in family behavior which varies in response to technological developments such as improved methods of birth control, changes in economic conditions such as the Depression (Angell, 1936) or to developments in government policies and programs such as social security benefits. On the other side of the coin, changes in family structure and functioning such as the increasing number of single parent families and working mothers can have profound effects upon the economy and businesses.

The basic assumptions underlying the ecological framework include (a) the family is a social system of interdependent members;(b) family members have roles and responsibilities within and outside of the family unit and demands, expectations, and opportunities associated with these roles may affect the family unit and its functioning; (c) family systems move through a range of predictable family development tasks and are called upon to adapt to a variety of stress producing situations such as birth of a child and launching children from the family unit; (d) family systems also face life changes and associated crises such as death in the family, and illnesses. Families are therefore expected to develop family resources-economic, social support, physical health, and neighborhood relationships, as well as be able to employ a range of coping strategies to adapt to these expected and unexpected life events; (e) the family performs the specific functions of membership (self-definition and maintaining continuity); of Economic Support and Consumer (provide basic material needs of its members) and; of Nurturant, Health and Socialization (to rear and nurture their young, and provide each member with psychological sustenance); (f) families are not passive recipients of policies and programs and can influence the social system to produce change. The basic feature of the ecological perspective is the importance of the relationships and exchanges between the family and other elements in the social system to include work, school, church and social programs.

The salience of family stress as an important aspect of this ecological perspective and a focus for family impact analysis is reflected in these assumptions, has been underscored recently in family impact literature, and appears to be a topic of considerable interest to social scientists. The authors of the Interim Report of the Family Impact Seminar (1978:20) emphasized that "In all these areas [research, service and policy] there is much more interest in examining and working with the strengths of families -- how they cope and adapt and change rather than concentrating on only pathology and inadequacies." To encourage this interest in family stress and coping as an important aspect of family impact analysis, we need to identify the important components of Family Stress Theory and begin to discuss their potential as a complementary framework to the Ecological perspective in the advancement of family impact analysis.

FAMILY STRESS THEORY

Developing a Perspective of Family Stress and Family Impact Analysis

The most decrepid, unsanitary, stressful and crime filled cities have served as "home" for families of all races and types of family structures. Families are called upon to raise children under living

conditions psychologically so stressful that they seem incompatible with human growth and development. Life events of having a handicapped child, a family member with terminal illness, unemployment, death and the family developmental strains of raising a child or managing the costs of college education often times place heavy demands on the family's social, financial, and psychological resources. By and large, families appear most capable of adjusting to these situations as well as the more detestable hardships of war and disasters.

Realistically, the family cannot assume and respond to all its basic responsibilities of membership (self definition and maintaining continuity) economic support and consumer support (provide the basic material needs of its members), and its nurturant, health and socializing functions (to rear and nurture their young and provide for each family member) and adjust to social diseases, individual and family change, and unexpected insults without, at some time reaching a point of diminishing returns, in its efforts at adaptation. Many changes and adaptive responses that appear quite functional in managing stress, at first glance, may ultimately be destructive to family members and the stability of the family unit. Medical, economic and psychological demands of raising a child with spina bifidia cystica, for example, places a heavy burden on the family unit. In an adaptive manner, families appear most capable of absorbing the added responsibilities. However, follow-up studies of these families reveal a pattern of chronic stress which, in numerous cases results in marital discord and divorce (Tew, Payne and Laurence, 1974; Martin, 1975). Adaptation, in these situations often involves shifting of family psychological and economic resources or "robbing from Peter to pay Paul". These coping responses first protects the family from fear of loss and instills hope for the child's future. Eventually, for many families these protective and supportive behaviors may give way to financial difficulties, sibling conflicts, marital discord, and family breakdown. Exposure to the stressor event which calls for continuous coping and adaptation may also make the family unit more vulnerable to subsequent life events and stressors which also call for family resources. One may hypothesize that the family's increased vulnerability created by chronic stress and the occurance of a subsequent stressor event could push the family to the point of exhaustion.

In observing aberrations in family functioning such as, marital discord and at the extreme, child abuse and spouse abuse; policy makers and behavioral scientists alike agree that these outcomes are prevalent simply because of premorbid deficiencies is the psychological makeup of the family members involved. But the truth appears to be more complex, and that such disturbances may be attributed, in part, to the social and psychological changes in society, and the demands placed on family life which are both stressful and call for more family resources than they are capable of responding with or developing to meet these demands in a timely manner. While families are most adaptive to changes and stress and vary in their abilities to respond to stress, their interpersonal, psychological and economic resources are finite.

Strengthening families to protect itself from the effects of stress, and if disrupted by stress, to recover - appear to be reasonable objectives for family policy. Furthermore, to study the impact of policies on family resources which include coping abilities in the management of stress would be equally appropriate foci for family impact analysis. To advance this line of reasoning and argue that family stress theory could contribute to family impact analysis, it is necessary to begin to identify those key concepts and propositions which appear most relevant to this family methodology.

Basic Components of Family Stress Theory

Traditional approaches to family stress theory have emerged from family sociology with a resulting emphasis on family vulnerability and regenerative power, the twin concepts which characterize the family's ability to withstand the initial impact of a stressor, and, if internally disrupted by the stress, the family's ability to recover... Burr (1973) has synthesized the research and theories that have gained coherent form in nearly half a century of family research and has formulated specific propositions around these two concepts. The picture of family adaptation to stress that emerges from this literature depicts the family as a reactor to stress, as a manager of resources within the family unit to combat and control change within the family system.

Recent developments in family stress research and family theory have underscored the importance of family coping behavior in the management of stress. The active process of employing coping strategies within the family and in transactions with the community to decrease its vulnerability to stress and to recover from a crisis have also received consideration in both research and theory building (McCubbin, in press).

It seems reasonable to argue that successful family adaptation to stress involves at least two major sets of family resources. First the family must have or will develop its internal resources such as integration and adaptability to withstand the social and psychological stresses to which the family may be exposed. These resources have been carefully documented in the host of disaster studies reviewed by Hill and Hansen (1962) and in the classic studies of family adjustment in the face of the depression and unemployment (Angell, 1936; Cavan and Ranck, 1938; Koos, 1946), and appear to be well delineated in the theory building efforts to date (Burr, 1973). Second, the family will have or develop and employ a range of coping strategies directed at strengthening its internal organization and functioning, at procuring community and social supports, and in some cases, at diverting reducing or eliminating the sources of stress.

One of the unique contributions of Hill's (1958) A, B, C, X formulation which has served as the foundation for family stress theory is the identification of the B factor, or what Hill has come to refer to as the family's crisis meeting resources. This multidimensional variable denotes the family's ability to prevent a stressor event of change in the family social system from creating some crisis or disruptiveness in the system (Burr, 1973:202). The recent investigations of family coping behaviors and coping strategies (Boss, McCubbin, and Lester, in press; McCubbin, in press; McCubbin, Boss et al., 1978) support the argument that coping behaviors are integral features of Hill's crisis meeting resources.

Family Internal Resources: Propositions

These developments in family stress theory focus on the interrelationships among two components of family resources - integration and adaptability and the two outcome variables - family vulnerability and family regenerative power. Focusing on family adjustment to the economic depression of the 1930s Angell (1936) found family integration and adaptability to be the two most important variables. Family integration is defined as the "bonds of coherence and unity running through family life, of which common interests, affection, and a sense of economic interdependence are the most prominent." Family adaptability is also a critical variable that denotes variation in the ability of a family to change its structure or way of operating with little psychic or organizational discomfort. When considered together, these four variables suggest four propositions for family impact analysis (Burr, 1973).

10.13: The amount of integration influences the family's vulnerability to stress and this is a positive relationship

10.11: Family integration influences the family's regenerative power and this is a positive relationship

10.14: The amount of family adaptability influences the family's vulnerability to stress and this is a positive relationship;

10.12: Family adaptability influences the family's regenerative power and this is a positive relationship.

Family Coping Resources: Propositions

The fit between the family and community may well be the major determinant of successful adaptation to stress. The family's ability to manage stress may depend on the efficacy of the solutions the culture, community or the organization provides. The family's coping with stress may depend in a large degree upon the adequacy of institutionalized solutions (McCubbin, in press). Hansen and Hill (1964:796) had noted previously the central role of the community in the family management of stress:

> "Just as the community can create stress on the family it can offer blueprints for behavior under stress...social institutions actually can prepare the family and its members for stress by providing roles and norms for post-impact behavior even before the stress agent hits. The community can prepare the family and the community for stresses by defining roles so that they can better fit emergencies or by developing institutionalized ways of coping with chronic uncertainty."

Recognizing that social policies and programs play a major role in defining what families can do to cope with stress, two propositions may be offered for family impact analysis.

> II.00: The clarity of Community Norms and Expectations regarding family coping behavior under stress influences the family's vulnerability to stress;
>
> II.01: The degree of family adherence to Community Norms and expectations regarding family coping behavior under stress influences a family's vulnerability and this is an inverse relationship.

In extremely stressful situations, institutionalized solutions to coping may lag behind the time and be inappropriate to the situation. Families are often placed in a tenuous position of developing new coping strategies to influence and control the hardships to which they are exposed. Increasingly, it is clear that major stresses on the family are not amenable to individual family solutions alone, but depend on highly organized cooperative efforts that transcend those of any individual family member no matter how well developed its integration and adaptive resources. The variable discussed appears to be the amount of family involvement in collective support activities which act as a concerted effort on behalf of all families in a specific crisis situation. Two propositions are advanced for family impact analysis:

> II.05: Collective Social Support Groups and Activities which serve to support and guide families under stress influences the family's regenerative power.
>
> II.04: The amount of involvement in collective Support Activities influences the regenerative power of families and this is a curvilinear relationship.

As a start, this basic sample of propositions from family stress theory suggest several important considerations for both family policy and family impact analysis. First family policy should be concerned with both the factors which facilitate the family's ability to recover from a crisis <u>and</u> those factors which would assist families in reducing its

vulnerability to stressful situations. Second, there are specific types of family resources such as adaptability and integration which could serve as targets for both family policy and family impact analysis. Third, there are specific social and community factors such as norms for coping with stress and collective social support groups which could be important objectives for family policy and family impact analysis.

APPLICATION TO FAMILY IMPACT ANALYSIS

The argument for family stress theory and some of its basic propositions can be subjected to a preliminary test by examining a specific policy which has been subjected to impact analysis. This brief analysis can be best achieved through the application of a modified checklist of that developed by the George Washington University Family Impact Seminar (1978:37). The modified checklist presented on page 11, is organized along two basic dimensions: (1) family types and (2) family resources in the management of stress. This checklist is based on the fundamental assumption that family resources are positively associated with the family's ability to fulfill its basic functions of membership, economic support and consumer functions as well as its socializing and nurturant functions. The impact of the select policy will be assessed on the basis of (a) whether the policy has a positive (+), negative (-), or curvilinear relationship (+/-) with the types of family resources (b) whether the type of relationship is based on inferences observations (*), descriptive data (**), or experimental studies (***). A summary discussion would follow the checklist type of analysis to complete the process.

POLICY: Deinstitutionalization and movement of treatment responsibilities for the mentally ill, and retarded, to the community and the family with the support of a <u>subsidy</u> of up to $250 per month.

DISCUSSION OF CHECKLIST ANALYSIS

Zimmerman (1978) in her careful analysis of this complex policy and its impact on the family revealed that the effects of community based treatment on family resources and functioning have produced mixed findings. Grad and Sinsbury (1968) compared the effects of a community based psychiatric program and a hospital based psychiatric services in England and found that the family hardships (burdens) depended upon the symptoms of the mentally ill family member and on the amount of social supportive services families received in helping them cope with their burden. It is important to note the adverse effect of family stress on family functioning; over one-half of the families reported emotional disturbance because of worry about the patient. There were also reports of restricted social and leisure time activities, disturbed domestic routines and reduced family income. Obviously the social, economic and psychological costs are high for the family. A four year follow-up study of sixty-two schizophrenic patients (Hoenig and Hamilton, 1966) revealed that the typical stress situation was one in which the behavior of the patient upset the family and

CHECKLIST ANALYSIS[+++]

FAMILY TYPES AND DEVELOPMENTAL VARIABLES	FAMILY FUNCTIONS: MEMBERSHIP	ECONOMIC SUPPORT	SOCIALIZATION
	FAMILY RESOURCES: ADAPTABILITY	COHESIVENESS	NORMS FOR COPING	COLLECTIVE SOCIAL SUPPORT
1. Socio-economic characteristics				
Income	+*	+*	+*	+*
Education	nc	nc		nc
Occupation	nc	nc		
2. Family Structure				
Single parent family	+*	+*	+*	+*
Two parent family	+*	+*	+**	+***
Extended family	nc		nc	nc
reconstituted family@	nc		nc	nc
de facto families@@	nc		nc	nc
Economic Base in the Family				
No wage earner	+*	+*	+*	+*
One Wage earner	+***	+***	+***	+***
Two Wage earners	+*	+*	+*	+*
3. Family Development Stages				
Early family formation	+**	+**	+**	+**
Family with school age	+***	+***	+***	+***
Family with children in transition to adulthood	+*	+*	+*	+*
Family with no children	nc	nc	nc	nc
Family with elderly dependents/aging parents	nc	nc	nc	nc

@ Families of second or subsequent marriage
@@ Families that are not defined by blood, marriage or legal adoption (formal or informal foster and informal adoption families)

nc Not considered in any of the research or observational studies

Impact Codes: +=positive ; -= negative and +/- =curvilinear
Rearch Codes: * = impact code based on inference and/or observation
** = impact code based on descriptive data/rearch
*** = impact code based on experimental research

[+++]Modified from Family Impact Seminar, Interim Report of the Family Impact Seminar Washington, D. C . 1978:37

prevented family members from carrying our routine family tasks. In contrast, the Mendota Mental Health Study (1975) of sixty discharged patients revealed that if extensive supportive services are provided to both families and patients, community based treatment does not place a heavier burden on families. The most recent Minnesota study (1977) examined the value of an experimental financial subsidy program for fifty-six families of mentally retarded children in Minnesota. The children suffered from one or two handicapping conditions of which cerebral palsy, seizures, hyperactivity and poor motor control were the most frequent. The program attempted to determine if a subsidy of up to $250 per month can enable families to continue caring. The subsidy covered costs of such support services as respite care, preschool programs, and visiting nurses. The preliminary data suggest that the subsidy apparently is sufficiently helpful in reducing family burden so that except for the most extreme cases, families are able to continue performing critical maintenance, social psychological and economic functions for their retarded child.

While far from being conclusive, the review of select research efforts on the subject of family care of the emotionally disturbed and the retarded and an experimental study of financial support to families to perform such services reveals the relative importance of policies which will facilitate the family's ability to cope with the situation. Specifically, the findings suggest that family coping, adaptability and cohesiveness may be enhanced by complementary policies. The policy to shift responsibilities to the family certainly creates some hardships and stress for the family. To balance this stressful situation and in recognition of the importance of social support noted in earlier studies, a supplementary policy of up to $250 subsidy to these families was proposed and tested. This type of economic support legitimated and encouraged the families to utilize formal types of social support such as respite care, and visiting nurses as means for coping. Concomitantly, such a subsidy facilitated the family's involvement in the community, their development of relationships, and the pursuit of individual goals to meet individual and family needs.

Conclusion

This effort to advance family stress theory as a framework for family policy and family impact analysis is compatible with, if not a logical development within the broader ecological framework proposed by the Family Impact Seminar, George Washington University. The family stress framework encourages a relatively important shift in emphasis towards prevention rather than treatment and towards the need for support programs and related policies, rather than substitute programs and policies. The central assumption of this family stress framework is that families have the capacity to organize a variety of supports-economic, social, and psychological and are capable of responding to stress in most adaptive and creative ways. Family impact analysts would do well to explore the use of this framework and examine the ways in which policies negate or encourage the development of family resources, and patterns of coping which make for successful adaptation in the face of social change and stress.

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